

Speech at COSAC conference – Delivering on Development

Barry Andrews

CEO, GOAL

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INTRODUCTION

1. I wish to thank the organisers for the invitation to participate in this afternoon's panel discussion.
2. As one of Ireland's largest INGOs, GOAL is active in 13 countries, mostly in sub-Saharan Africa and most recently in Syria. With 2,500 staff and an annual budget of €60m we deliver humanitarian assistance as well as key nutrition, health and other interventions in the countries in which we operate. Our strategic plan commits us to working towards a world where the poorest people in the world have access to the fundamental rights of life.
3. Ireland has been at the forefront of the aid debate. For many years, Ireland's religious missions led innovations in education and health care in the developing world. Soon after, NGOs, including GOAL which was set up in 1977, began to work with very vulnerable populations. Concern and Trocaire are among the most respected INGOs globally in the coherence of their advocacy platform and the high degree of respect in the countries in which they operate. Ireland also hosts very active and innovative branches of major world NGOs like Oxfam, World Vision, Plan and UNICEF.
4. The Irish people have been both generous and thoughtful in their approach to improving the lives of the planet's most vulnerable people. Individuals

like our own Mary Robinson, Bob Geldof and Bono have been leading advocates and activists through Live Aid and the One Foundation. More recently, the Irish Government has taken up the challenge of ensuring that that popular sentiment is reflected in Government policy. In spite of retrenchment in the last few years, Irish Aid continues to be one of the most impactful donors ensuring greater Irish influence than our size should permit. Our record on aid gives us the platform to drive radical reform.

5. The Climate Justice conference that took place here in Dublin Castle last April had a very strong Southern focus with key testimonials being delivered by, for example, women farmers and activists with civil society organisations on the ground informing thinking among global leaders gathered on that occasion.

THE EU AND GOAL

6. The EU supports some key programmes for GOAL. Firstly, in Sierra Leone the EU is supporting our Disadvantaged Children and Youth initiative. As a former Minister for Children I am especially proud of the innovation involved in this programme. As we think about what the post-2015 agenda is going to look like, working in complex child protection environments requires more of our energy than has been the case.

This programme addresses the needs of street children, by providing them with a safe haven, shelter, food and alternative life choices.

We work with communities in slum areas to help prevent children being exploited and falling into prostitution or child labour.

It goes without saying that child protection work in stable environments is extremely complex and carries with it some great risks. This is all the more so in unstable and complex environments like the slums of Sierra Leone. However, the EU supports GOAL to do this work. This is an area I would encourage the EU to continue to support post-2015. The need is great but because of the complexity, most NGOs are disinclined to do this kind of work.

7. The EU also supports our REFLECT programme in South Sudan. In the area we work in, female adult literacy is 16%. REFLECT is a programme

pioneered by GOAL in Sudan over a decade ago and is designed to empower women in vulnerable communities through raising literacy levels, reducing child mortality and ensuring sustainable development. It has been hugely successful and has been rolled out in Malawi and Ethiopia.

Classes are run for 15 to 20 women for two hours a day and the course runs over two years. Women learn to read and write in English, the national language of the new country, with sessions based around food and nutrition, hygiene, child-raising and education. During year one, participants will elect a leader among themselves. The second year covers life skills and aims to further improve literacy and numeracy in addition to the management of small business.

At the end of the programme GOAL will assist the women in setting up their enterprises for three months.

For this work, GOAL received a UNESCO literacy prize in 2005. Recently, GOAL received a grant for €300,000 for our REFLECT programme in Sudan.

8. The total current EC and ECHO funding to GOAL is just over €10m per annum.

SYRIA

9. The greatest humanitarian catastrophe of recent years has been unfolding for the past two years in Syria. With high levels of fatality and displacement together with extreme complexity, resolution seems as far away now as ever.
10. The total failure of the international system to find its voice in any coherent way in regard to Syria underlines how much really needs to be done at an international level. After the Rwandan genocide, a lot of hot air and high-flown rhetoric was circulated at innumerable conferences and in innumerable academic papers with everyone saying “never again”. The UN, to its credit, set itself the task of delivering on that promise.
11. Yet today, the UN still refuses to do cross-border work to relieve the enormous need in Northern Syria. A huge effort is being made to meet the genuine need in Government held areas and in refugee camps in neighbouring countries but the pressure on places along the Turkish border

in particular is growing.

12. The UN over the last 20 years grappled with how to reconcile, on the one hand, the sovereignty of member-states with, on the other hand, the protection of populations from mass atrocities inflicted or permitted by those member-states. To this end, the set of principles known as “Responsibility to Protect (R2P)” emerged in 2000.
13. In a nutshell, R2P meant that sovereignty was a duty rather than a right. And if a member-state failed in its duty to protect its people from mass atrocities, this would engage a process of response from the UN. In September 2012, Ban Ki-Moon presented a report on R2P to the General Assembly of the UN and it was discussed for the fourth year in a row. At the debate, the same post-Rwanda rhetoric was exchanged among the delegates. In fairness, it is not a simple idea and few people would like to have to make decisions when the consequences of failure carry such enormous risks. Nevertheless, it is hard to escape the conclusion that the international community is now confronted with the ghost of Rwanda and finds itself utterly powerless. Sadly, the price of this failure is now being counted in bodies in Syria. Syria, by any reasonable measure, is indeed a humanitarian catastrophe. I visited Turkey and Syria recently, to review GOAL’s programmes inside Syria.
14. Humanitarian assistance in non-international conflicts is referred to in Protocol II to the Geneva Conventions and in customary international law. Protocol II states that “if the civilian population is suffering undue hardship owing to a lack of supplies essential for its survival, ... relief actions for the civilian population which are of an exclusively humanitarian and impartial nature and which are conducted without any adverse distinction shall be undertaken subject to the consent of the [host state].” In its commentary on Protocol II, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) says that “the fact that consent is required does not mean that the decision is left to the discretion of the parties,” and that “if the survival of the population is threatened and a humanitarian organisation fulfilling the required conditions of impartiality and non-discrimination is able to remedy this situation, relief actions must take place.” The reticence of international actors including the EU in the face of this point of customary international law needs to be challenged in parliaments across Europe as well as in the European Parliament itself.

THE ROLE OF NGOs

15. The northern hemisphere's advantage in wealth is diminishing. There is a great global rebalancing going on worldwide which will bring many to the conclusion that some have arrived at already; namely, that northern governments and by extension INGOs will have less and less to offer highly educated, well-resourced and quite frankly proud and assertive citizens that have for too long relied on aid for survival.
16. The rethinking of the role of NGOs is now urgent. It is useless to talk about Africa as a whole because of its size with over 1 billion people and 1000 languages. But in the short time that I have I hope I will be forgiven one generality. That resurgent pride and assertiveness driven by educational opportunities and wider communication is something that I sense in my brief time working in this sector. This has manifested itself at government, local and community level. Governments are quite properly driving NGOs to greater compliance with local tax codes and requiring that NGOs become incorporated under local Company Law provisions with local directors. My personal view about this is that it is not before time.

Recently I had the honour of introducing the Nigerian Human Rights lawyer Hauwa Ibrahim to an audience in Dublin. Hauwa won the Sakharov prize in 2005 for her work defending clients charged with offences under Sharia law. She didn't hold back in her criticism of NGOs and made comments about the SUVs and high overheads and the cultural insensitivity of language used by NGOs and almost complete lack of transferability of European or for that matter Chinese or American standards to many settings in Africa. She was also heavily critical of the vanity and self-serving nature of some NGOs who are more concerned with their televisual image than the quality of the work that they do.

17. In my conversations with NGOs over the last 6 months it is clear that this message has begun to be considered. Coupled with financial pressures being experienced, talk about rationalisation is much more prevalent than had been the case. There is no reason why this should not also be driven by parliamentarians.
18. Recently many countries have moved from being low income to middle income countries. India is a case in point. The UK government recently

announced that it would cease funding the Indian government from 2015. With a smaller GDP in nominal terms than the UK, India still holds almost three times as much foreign exchange reserves. The argument against this disengagement is based on the still enormous need in India and the suggestion that it is designed to counter criticism of ring-fenced aid budgets. GOAL's approach is to reconfigure our work in India. GOAL started as an aid agency working with street children in 1977. We are now in the process of reconfiguring our operation so that it is locally incorporated and run by Indian nationals. The plan is to be at arms-length with our role being to merely provide a financial indemnity for the work being carried out by GOAL India. This is a work in progress but it will provide us with a road map which could inform our approach to countries that reach escape velocity.

19. In conclusion, GOAL will continue to work closely with the EU on our more innovative development initiatives. Equally we are grateful to ECHO for their support on humanitarian work. We hope very sincerely, that given the EU's predominant role in aid that it will make the argument for a coherent and rigorous application of customary international law so that we can finally begin to properly absorb the lessons of previous failures in this field.